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ABSTRACT

At Southeast Missouri State University, library handbooks have been developed in an effort to meet patron needs in an environment of reduced library staff. The first handbook, "Welcome to Kent Library," was developed to meet the needs of the revamped general education program, and was given free to first-year students in a required seminar class with a unit on using the library. Library staff found that faculty scheduled fewer bibliographic instruction sessions with library staff, and instead they relied on the handbook for basic library information. After the success of the student handbook, a faculty handbook was developed and distributed to all faculty. The handbooks were successful because they targeted specific audiences, used a simple organizational structure, were written in clear and concise language, and included only the most important information, with a referral to the appropriate contact person provided at the end of each section. The process forced the clarification and updating of written library policies and procedures, and identified inconsistencies or gaps in policy or procedures. The handbooks have helped address the reductions in reference staff by enabling many patrons to help themselves use the library's services with little or no assistance from the librarians. (SWC)

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Using Library Handbooks to Compensate for Reductions in Reference Staff

Abstract

Library handbooks were originally developed to meet the needs of a new general education program. Reductions in reference staff occurring concurrently with the implementation of the revamped general education curriculum resulted in the use and further development of handbooks far beyond the originally intended scope of the project.

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At Southeast Missouri State University, library handbooks have been developed in an effort to meet patron needs in an environment of reductions in library staff. The university library is the only library of any size in the university's twenty-five county service region, and serves also as a public resource for one of the state's most economically and educationally disadvantaged regions. Meeting the informational needs of both the academic community and the public has become increasingly difficult as technological advances have interjected a hardware barrier between patrons and information at the same time that budget cuts have reduced the possibility of direct staff assistance.

Before a firm decision was made to develop a handbook, the library literature was searched and online discussion groups such as BI-L and Ref-L were monitored to determine how other libraries were responding to the impact of staff reductions on patron assistance. While some practical solutions appeared in the online discussion groups, reviews of the literature were not particularly helpful, as the focus was limited to either the reporting of staff cuts, or how-to articles on the process of reducing personnel.

Much of the BI literature revolves around three approaches to library instruction: tours, workbooks, and one-shot lectures. All of these methods work with a captive audience, but each has its

drawbacks, and none reaches patrons not belonging to a targeted group. Tours are obviously very good at conveying *what* and *where*, but not so good when it comes to *how* or *why*. Lectures allow one to focus on *what*, *how*, and *why*, but are less able to convey *where*. Self-paced workbooks would seem to overcome the limitations of both the tour and the lecture; however, a number of considerations made that option impractical. Foremost was the amount of staff time that would be required to grade the workbooks. Obviously, in a situation involving personnel cuts, an approach which added to the workload was counterproductive.

References in the literature to library anxiety (Mellon, 162-163), and to reactions of hostility toward workbooks (Markman, 132-133) were also a matter of concern. Both students and community residents commonly complain that the library is so large (four floors and 350,000 volumes) that they do not know how or where to start. Also, the region is noted for its antipathy toward education. There was no desire to add to the hostility factor.

A major restructuring of the university's general education curriculum triggered the development of the first handbook, Welcome to Kent Library. Under the new University Studies program, all

incoming freshmen are required to take a three-hour course, Creative and Critical Thinking, which includes a unit on using the library. In addition, all other University Studies courses are required to include substantial library work. A total of 48 credit hours of University Studies coursework is required for graduation. Since the previous general education program included no library requirements, this has resulted in a significant increase in both library use and in bibliographic instruction. Complicating the situation is the fact that faculty for the freshman course are drawn from all disciplines, and tend to teach the course from the perspective of their disciplinary backgrounds. Thus, the library component must accommodate a much wider spectrum of topics and approaches than is the case when a BI program is centered on a composition course.

Using the course, Creative and Critical Thinking, as the vehicle for distribution, the student handbook is provided free of charge to all incoming freshmen during the first few weeks of the semester. Transfer students are targeted separately, while it is hoped that continuing students have retained the copies they received when they first entered the institution. The handbook is

twenty pages in length, and includes such items as library hours, basic information concerning the circulation policies, floorplans, an introduction to the opac, a book location guide, the locations of major indexes and abstracts, a listing and explanation of CD-ROM products, an introduction to government documents, an explanation of key library departments, and important telephone numbers. Online and Internet sources are not covered, since at this time such resources either must be accessed through labs operated by the university's computer center, or are not routinely provided to undergraduate students. There are no exercises or assignments included in the handbook, as it was designed solely for the conveying of information about the library and its resources, not as a vehicle of active learning. The handbook was produced in-house on a MacIntosh computer and mass produced at the university's printing and duplication shop.

Not long after the student handbooks were made available to the freshman seminar classes, it became apparent that some faculty were no longer scheduling bibliographic instruction sessions in the library, but, rather, were opting to go through the handbook with their sections themselves and then sending the students to the

library with assignments of their own design, to be completed outside of class. It also became obvious that many faculty who continued to schedule sessions with the librarians were assigning students who missed those sessions to read the handbook and complete make-up assignments on their own, since these students typically came to the reference desk to request the booklets and ask about assignment. The reference staff had already generated a two-sided worksheet which served as a generic template for assignment with the opac, *Readers' Guide*, and basic CD ROM periodical index. This ended up being the make-up assignment of choice for most professors.

As the usefulness of the student handbook became increasingly obvious, it was decided to use it as the basis for a second handbook specifically targeted to faculty. Two conditions contributed to this decision: the library participates in a weeklong workshop for new faculty each August, and a handbook covering essential library policies and procedures would be both more convenient for the new faculty member and more reflective of the professionalism of the library staff; and longtime faculty fearful of all the technology which has become commonplace in

libraries could use it for self-instruction, since many are unwilling to request assistance (Guilefoyle, 27). A number of special features, such as reproducible forms for placing materials on reserve or for requesting materials via interlibrary loan, were included in the faculty handbook, along with the names and telephone numbers of library staff members who should be contacted for assistance with regard to particular concerns. As soon as the first print run was received, copies were sent to all current faculty. Incoming new faculty are identified through the Provost's office each summer to ensure that on one is missed.

A number of factors have contributed to the success of the library handbooks. First, they are not generic; each was developed with a particular audience in mind (Clark, 221). Drafts of the student handbook were reviewed by the University Library Committee, a nine-member standing committee comprised of one faculty member from each of the five colleges, one librarian, one undergraduate student, one graduate student, and the library director (as an ex officio member). Input from those students was given serious consideration in the development of the final draft. While the faculty handbook drew heavily from the student handbook, a point

was made to address particular questions recurrently asked by faculty members, such as procedures and policies governing specific services, and special search features available on the opac.

In addition to targeting specific audiences, both publications employed a very simple organizational structure. The handbooks rely on detailed tables of contents to guide the user to specific information, with sections clearly labeled in large, bold-face type. Thus it does not require much effort to locate the desired information.

Finally, every effort was made to keep the language clear and concise. Jargon was avoided where possible, and explained where its use was inescapable. Excess verbiage was cut. Only the most important information was included, with a referral to the appropriate service point or contact person at the end of each section. As a result, these publications are focused and easy to use; factors which have contributed to their acceptance by the target populations.

While the original reason for generating library handbooks was to ensure that all students in the freshman seminar course received the same core of information about the library (Metter, 221), it

quickly became apparent that there were other patron populations who could benefit from similar materials. Developing these materials has resulted in a number of unforeseen benefits to the library. The process forced the clarification and updating of written policies and procedures which had not been examined in years. It also brought to light inconsistencies within and between policies, and gaps where no policy or consistently applied procedure existed. Since technical services librarians and support professionals from all departments participate in the evening and weekend reference rotation, having all of these materials gathered together in a single, easily used source has proven to be very helpful.

The development of library handbooks has proven to be very worthwhile, not only in bibliographic instruction, but also in the provision of reference service in an environment of declining staff size. In fact, the handbooks are probably the most effective way of reaching patrons besides the bibliographic instruction sessions. Patrons who are proficient at self-instruction are able to use the handbooks to help themselves use the library's various services and technologies with little or no assistance from the librarians,

while those who require moderate levels of assistance are able to use the printed information to help them continue their research once the librarian gets them started. Reducing the level of assistance provided to these groups frees staff to provide the greater degree of librarian intervention required by patrons less comfortable using the library, and allows a smaller staff to continue to meet patron needs at an acceptable level.

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